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Is There Salvation Outside the Orthodox Church?

by
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and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. 48. But he that knew not, and did commit things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes. For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required: and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more.

⁴ Lossky, V., *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, p. 235.

⁵ *I Corinthians 5:12* - For what have I to do to judge them also that are without? do not ye judge them that are within?

⁶ Khomyakov, A. S., *The Church is One*, section 2; p. 18.

⁷ Grabbe, Bishop Gregory, "The Unity and Uniqueness of the Church," *St. Nectarios Educational Series*, No. 29, p. 11. Anyone who wishes fully to enter into the Orthodox Church's teaching on this subject should read this whole article.

⁸ Taushev, Archbishop Averky, *Voprosy i Otvety [Questions and Answers]*, p. 28. It is worth noting that Bishop Gregory is a representative of the more patristic school of Russian theology, revitalized by Metropolitan Anthony (Khrapovitsky), while Archbishop Averky speaks for the more traditional and scholastic school of Russian theology, but they both agree on the question of salvation for those outside the Orthodox Church.

⁹ For example: Androustos, K., *Dogmatikê tês Orthodoxou Anatólikês Ekklesiás*, pp. 266-267.

¹⁰ Such, for example, are works of mercy without real love for the suffering, which are done for the sake of "merit" before God, or still worse, from vainglory. The distortion of dogmas tells upon moral principles also, and consequently can make works of charity not cleanse the soul, but darken it. [Note in original.]

¹¹ Bishop Gregory, *op. cit.*, pp. 12-13.

¹² Birchall, C., *The Life of Our Holy Father St. Maximus the Confessor*, p. 38.



Is There Salvation Outside The Orthodox Church?

by

Protopresbyter Seraphim Johnson

It is a sad fact that many of those who disagree with the Holy Orthodox Church in North America's (HOCNA) firm stand for the Orthodox Faith claim that this body teaches that anyone who is not a member of it is "damned to hell." This is a very serious charge, which, if true, would argue that the HOCNA has itself abandoned the Christian faith. Many of those who make this claim have come to Orthodoxy from one of the Western churches, either Protestant or Roman Catholic. The Roman Catholic Church has traditionally taught that infants who die unbaptized can hope for nothing more than Limbo, a state superior to hell, but significantly below heaven, in which they will experience natural happiness, but not supernatural bliss¹. The Protestant reformers (Luther, Calvin, etc.) go even further and teach that all who have not accepted Christ in this life will be condemned to hell. "Evangelical" Protestantism continues to teach this doctrine, but more liberal varieties of Protestantism have largely lost interest in the question of salvation. Unfortunately, when former Protestants and Roman Catholics are baptized into Orthodoxy, they often bring much baggage along with them from their past. This is one area which many of them may have failed to examine, so it is quite possible that they are interpreting the HOCNA's stand from the viewpoint of their previous denominations, rather than in an Orthodox manner. And it is not uncommon to find that even those who have been raised in Orthodoxy in this country have been influenced by the dominant Protestant and Roman Catholic views surrounding them. For this reason, it is important to start by looking carefully at the teaching of the Orthodox Church on salvation for those who are not members of the Church.

It is true that St. Cyprian of Carthage and other Fathers stated that “outside the Church there is no salvation.” However, if one looks at their actual statements, one quickly sees that they are discussing certain specific situations: either the case of those who have been members of the Church and then have consciously and willfully abandoned the Church or the case of those pagans who have heard the Gospel and have rejected it. They do not usually address the case of those who have never even heard of Christ (pagans, etc.), and they do not really consider the case of those who have fallen away from the Church “by accident,” i.e. by following hierarchs they trusted to be Orthodox, but who in fact have led them into error without their being aware of it. In these instances, we must fall back on several passages in the Scriptures which teach us that God will judge all nations primarily on the basis of how well they have served Christ, even if they did not know him (Matt. 25:32-46, especially v. 44)². In St. Luke’s Gospel, the Lord tells us that those who do not know the Master’s will and do things worthy of punishment will receive a much lighter punishment than those who do know it and fail to obey it (Luke 12:47-48)³. And St. Paul teaches that men will be judged by how well they obey the Law which is written in their hearts, even if they are outside the Covenant in this life: “For as many as have sinned without law will also perish without law, and as many as have sinned in the law will be judged by the law (for when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law unto themselves, who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them) in the day when God will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ, according to my gospel” (Romans 2:12-16). The Apostle also refused to judge those outside the Church, saying “For what have I to do with judging those also who are outside? ... But those who

I should condemn anyone or say that I alone am being saved! However, I shall sooner die than to apostatize in any way from the true Faith, and thereby suffer torments of conscience.”¹²

Endnotes

¹ Bullough, S., *Roman Catholicism*, pp. 83-84. Roman Catholicism teaches that adults may, however, attain salvation through the “Baptism of Desire,” even if they have not received physical Baptism. This teaching, although phrased differently, has similarities to that of Orthodoxy.

² *Matthew 25:32-46* - 32. And before Him shall be gathered all nations: and He shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth His sheep from the goats. 33. And He shall set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. 34. Then shall the King say unto them on His right hand. Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. 35. For I was an hungered, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in. 36. Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me. 37. Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungered, and fed thee: or thirsty, and gave thee drink? 38. When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee? 39. Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee? 40. And the King shall answer and say unto them, Amen, I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me. 41. Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels. 42. For I was an hungered, and ye gave me no meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink. 43. I was a stranger, and ye took me not in: naked, and ye clothed me not: sick, and in prison and ye visited me not. 44. Then shall they also answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungered, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto thee? 45. Then shall he answer them, saying, ‘I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me. 46. And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal.

³ *Luke 12:47-48* - 47. And that servant, which knew his lord’s will,

be Orthodox Christian Churches and sees that they have denied the fundamental doctrines and canons of the Ecumenical Councils and the Orthodox Church throughout history. In response, it says that in its judgment such bodies are no longer part of the Orthodox Church, even though they came from it originally, since they no longer bear the marks of membership in the Orthodox Church. And it is likely that many of these bodies would in fact agree with us that they are no longer part of that tradition of Orthodoxy which they consider outmoded and “unsuited to the demands of modern life.”

As far as we are able, we try to keep the doctrines and practices (canons) of the Orthodox Church unchanged, believing that thereby we maintain our unity with our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. We are fearful for those who do not maintain this unity, but we do not judge their salvation. We do say that, in our judgment, they are no longer members of the Orthodox Church, and therefore we cannot share with them in prayer and the Holy Mysteries; but as to their ultimate fate God alone is their judge and we commend them to His mercy. To sum up our view on those who depart from Orthodoxy, we can do no better than to quote the words of St. Maximus the Confessor (+ 662) when he was undergoing persecution for refusing to follow the apostate Patriarchs of the East in his day. His persecutors inquired of him, “Then you alone will be saved, and all others will perish?” And he replied, “When all the people in Babylon were worshiping the golden idol, the Three Holy Children did not condemn anyone to perdition. They did not concern themselves with the doings of others, but took care only for themselves, lest they should fall away from true piety. In precisely the same way, when Daniel was cast into the lion’s den, he did not condemn any of those who, fulfilling the law of Darius, did not wish to pray to God, but he kept in mind his own duty, and desired rather to die than to sin against his conscience by transgressing the Law of God. God forbid that

are outside God judges” (I Cor. 5:12-13). From these passages, the Fathers and theologians of the Church have drawn a consistent conclusion about the state of those who have never been members of the visible Church on earth. Various teachers have expressed the same general view, so we will give only a few representative examples of it here.

Thus, for example, a well-known Russian theologian of this century teaches:

But the limits of the Church beyond death and the possibilities for salvation for those who have not known the light in this life, remain a mystery of the divine mercy for us, on which we dare not count, but to which we cannot place any human bonds⁴.

And the famous Russian theologian of the last century, A. S. Khomyakov, expressed the same ideas:

Inasmuch as the earthly and visible Church is not the fullness and completeness of the whole Church which the Lord has appointed to appear at the final judgement of all creation, she acts and knows only within her own limits; and (according to the words of Paul the Apostle, to the Corinthians, I Cor. 5:12)⁵ does not judge the rest of mankind, and only looks upon those as excluded, that is to say, not belonging to her, who exclude themselves. The rest of mankind, whether alien from the Church, or united to her by ties which God has not willed to reveal to her, she leaves to the judgement of the great day. The Church on earth judges for herself only, according to the grace of the Spirit, and the freedom granted her through Christ, inviting also the rest of mankind to the unity and adoption of God in Christ; but upon those who do not hear her appeal she pronounces no sentence, knowing the command of her Saviour and Head, “not to judge another man’s servant” (Rom. 14:4).⁶

Bishop Gregory (Grabbe) of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia considers this whole issue at length:

We have already explained the meaning of redemption for Christians. As for the rest of mankind, it consists in the fact that the wall of hell [=Sheol, Hades] has been broken down. The descent of Christ into hell and His preaching there has made it possible to pass from it to heaven, that is, from a condition of torment to one of blessedness. How? By adopting the preaching of Christ, even though after death. The pagans who did not know about Christ on earth are in the same position as the mass of Old Testament humanity. Virtues prompted by the conscience are accessible to them, but Christian self-perfecting is inaccessible to them. With respect to life beyond the grave, they are similar to most of the people of the Old Testament. These people knew Christ only after death and received the possibility of leaving hell with Him. The pagans, too, who know Christ only after death, either accept His preaching and are united to the Church, or else become embittered and surrender themselves to torments.

How can we reconcile the thoughts here expressed with the doctrine of the Holy Fathers that salvation is impossible outside the Church? Very simply.

In the first place, salvation itself must be understood in a more comprehensive manner than as simply receiving a reward for a virtuous life. Salvation in Christian terms means self-perfecting, with the help of the grace of the Holy Spirit. There is none of this outside the Church.

In the second place, the attainment of blessedness outside the Church is precluded by the ideas expressed above, for the indispensable condition for it is union with the Church, **even though after**

does not have firm grounds in the writings of the Church; for the Church points out the unique and therefore the absolutely true way to salvation. She calls Her sons to **full** perfection, and gives no reassurance to those who hope to attain blessedness without Her and Her saving gifts of grace. For, if salvation is difficult for each one of us, for those who have been reborn in Holy Baptism, who have received the gifts of the Holy Spirit in Chrismation, who have been freed of our sins in the mystery of Repentance, who partake of the Body and Blood of the Lord, in a word, who make use of all the universal wealth of the Church of Christ, then how can one who does not have all this be saved?¹¹

The HOCNA and its mother True Orthodox Church in Greece have never differed from the rest of Orthodoxy on the salvation or damnation of those outside the Orthodox Church on earth, and one of the HOCNA's most prominent parishes actually published Bishop Gregory's reflections, cited above, in an English translation so that they would be known by Orthodox Christians in America.

But what, then, does the HOCNA say about modernist "Orthodox" Churches and their members? Doesn't it teach that they, at least, are damned? The Orthodox Church teaches that there are limits to the visible Church on earth, and that certain teachings and actions put one outside those limits. The Ecumenical Councils and the canons of the Church set the boundaries of the Church. Anyone who rejects the doctrines and canons they define is outside the Church on earth, no matter what title he may hold or how many ancient church buildings he may occupy. If you give up your citizenship in your native country, you are no longer a citizen of it; the same thing is true if you give up your citizenship in the Lord's Orthodox Church you are not an Orthodox Christian any longer. The HOCNA looks at other bodies which claim to

be for him to repent and become united with the Church. Without dwelling too long on this point, let us indicate a few obstacles. They will see that sins which they have already considered forgiven still weigh upon them with their full burden, and that those men whom they have been accustomed to regard as saints will be handed over to severe torments on hearing the words of the Saviour quoted above. Under such conditions, is it not easier to accept Christ if one has never known anything about Him previously, rather than if one has a distorted conception of Him which has already taken root in one? Did not St. John Chrysostom mean this when he said that “With incorrect dogmas there is no profit even from a good life, just as the reverse is also true: sound dogmas are of no profit with a depraved life” (*Homily on the Gospel of John the Theologian*, VIII, Book 2, p. 447)? How easy it is for one living outside the Church to give in to grumbling against God, Who has not made him worthy to be born within the bosom of the Church! How easy, instead of humble prayer for his acceptance even at the “twelfth hour” into the communion of the Church, for him to flare up with hate for those to blame for the error! And any sort of hatred, any sort of anger, separates from God. Furthermore, let us not forget that when standing before the face of God, one who is merely convinced of the truth of the Church will not become united to Her (how could he not be convinced of it, seeing Her glory face to face?), but only one who is worthy of it, that is, whose mental disposition is sufficiently pure. Only one who, in spite of his alienation from the Church, has developed in himself the virtues of love and humility, can with God’s help pass through this ordeal.

But this is merely a speculation of ours, which, as far as heretics and schismatics are concerned,

death. [Emphasis supplied]⁷

Archbishop Averky (Taushev) of Syracuse-Holy Trinity, also of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia, answered a question about the salvation of those outside the Church as follows:

“Mercy does not depend on him who wills, nor on him who labors, but on God who shows mercy,” says the Apostle (Romans 9:16). In the Church we are shown the way to salvation and are given the means, with the assistance of which a person is cleansed morally and has the direct promise of salvation. In this sense St. Cyprian of Carthage says that outside the Church “there is no salvation.” In the Church there is given to Christians—only to Christians—that of which the Apostle Peter writes: “His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue, by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust. But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love. For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ” (II Peter 1:3-8). What can we say about those on the outside, those who do not belong to the Church? Another apostle gives us to understand, “For what have I to do with judging those also who are outside? ... But those who are outside God judges” (II Corinthians 5:12-13). This means that we have no right to predetermine their fate. God “has mercy on whom He wills” (Romans 9:18). There is only one thing which we must

note: “to lead a completely righteous life,” as the questioner expressed it, means to live according to the commandments of blessedness. But this is beyond the strength of an “outside” person, one who is outside the grace-giving help which is hidden in Christ’s Orthodox Church.⁸

Precisely the same understanding—that we do not know what the state of such people will be, so we leave them to God, refusing to set limits to His mercy and trusting that He is capable of uniting them to His Church even after death—is also taught by representative Greek Orthodox theologians.⁹

Perhaps at this point the reader will grant that the Orthodox Church does not teach that pagans and the like are necessarily damned, but what about heretics and schismatics? The Holy Fathers do teach that such men are subject to God’s condemnation, but they also leave them to Him to judge, since we cannot know their true motives or culpability.

One may be tempted to ask what reason there is for anyone to be Orthodox, since it would seem that the Orthodox Church teaches that salvation can be found even by those who did not join it during their earthly lives. In fact, it might seem that we are even holding out the possibility that heretics and schismatics may attain salvation. But while this may be possible in God’s mercy, it is also very hard and uncertain. Consider what Bishop Gregory Grabbe writes about such people:

But how terrible the testimonies of the Holy Fathers are, concerning the fate of heretics and schismatics! These testimonies, of course, primarily refer to those who on earth were at war with the Church, that is, who struggled against Christ, rending His seamless garment. But neither is it easy for the lukewarm heretic to be united with the Church. The fact is, that if self-perfecting is possible to some

degree after death (only until the Last Judgment, of course), nevertheless a man’s moral condition after death is only a continuation of the state in which death found him, just as in maturity those principles adopted by a man in childhood and youth receive their application and development. Consequently, the errors even of those who have not consciously been at direct war with the Church of Christ will interfere with their being united to the Church. Of course, for them as for pagans, good works, mercy, love for one’s neighbor, do not remain without benefit. They prepare them too for being united with the Church after death. But any moral teaching which has been distorted by the heretics will stand in the way of repentance, which is indispensable for being united to the Church; and the best of works may turn out to be so only superficially, in actual fact bringing the soul no profit. That juridical system of moral teaching which is held by the Western heretics, for example, cannot be ignored in this context. The view of good works as a man’s merit can become an obstacle to humble repentance, and the conviction that one is right can lead to the questioning of Divine justice. I have in mind the Saviour’s words: “Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Thy name, and in Thy name have cast out devils, and in Thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from Me, ye that work iniquity” (Matt. vii, 22-28). Doubtless these words refer to heretics who are so unrepentant that even at the Last Judgment they squabble with God and in their deception hurl accusations at Him. If one can conceive of the posthumous psychology of such a man who has spent his whole life in a community separated from the Church, one will understand how hard it would